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Committees: Labor, Commerce, Research & Development, ranking Republican; Health & Long-Term Care; Ways & Means; Rules

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**February 24, 2006**

Dear Friends,

I hope your week has gone well. We're wrapping up the seventh week of the 59<sup>th</sup> Legislature's 2006 session. We are scheduled to finish session on March 9, but there is still plenty to do between now and the final day.

Today was the last day for Senate bills to be passed by House policy committees, and vice versa with House bills in the Senate policy committees. Monday is another deadline. That is the last day for Senate bills to be approved by the House fiscal committees and House proposals to be cleared by the Senate fiscal panels. After Monday, we'll resume spending most of our time on the Senate floor as we debate and vote on House bills that cleared the Senate committee process. Remember that bills necessary to implement the budget are still alive. That includes SB 6230, the public facilities district bill.

**Dueling operating budgets both overspend, set citizens up for major tax increase or severe cuts in vital services**

Last Friday, the Senate voted 26-19 to pass the 2006 supplemental operating budget (SSB 6386). This week, House budget writers unveiled their version of the supplemental operating budget.

There are several reasons why I voted against the Senate's \$600 million budget, which is the largest supplemental budget in state history and brings the 2005-07 biennial budget to \$27.35 billion.

A supplemental operating budget is supposed to "tweak" the original two-year budget, not embark on major spending programs. Although the Senate budget funds many worthy items, it isn't worth putting the state budget in another revenue deficit next year. We simply can't afford all the things in this budget. It is unsustainable, irresponsible and shortsighted.

The 2006 Senate supplemental budget:

- increases spending by \$4 billion over the last two-year budget, the largest increase in state history;
- increases spending by 17.3 percent over the 2004 supplemental budget;
- skips \$275 million of required pension funding payments;
- inflates the spending limit by \$1.2 billion, enabling greater spending this biennium and in the future;
- leaves \$900 million in reserves, but with virtually no protections to keep them from being raided at any time;
- spends all of the \$100 million increased revenue forecast released on February 15; and
- leaves the state with a projected deficit in the 2007-09 biennium.

Many important issues are missing in the Senate budget, including enough funding in the long-term care area. Many legislators have warned that the "bow-wave" costs created in the new spending will double in 2007-09, making the spending unsustainable and creating false hopes for Washington's vulnerable citizens and public schools. The House this week unveiled its own supplemental budget. The final version of the 2006 supplemental operating budget will likely be adopted in the last hours of the session.

### **Senate passes bill representing compromise on medical malpractice reform**

As is always true of compromises, no one gets everything, but everybody gets something. Called "minimal" and a good first step, the proposed changes to **2nd Substitute House Bill 2292** include a pre-lawsuit arbitration system to help resolve cases faster and at less cost; more oversight of malpractice insurance premiums; and steps to increase patient safety. However, major issues still need to be addressed: 1) revising joint and several liability, so that defendants are accountable for only their own proportionate share of fault; 2) maximizing a patient's recovery of damages by limiting attorney's fees; and 3) allowing future economic and non-economic payments to be made over time. 2SHB 2292, as amended with the compromise reached by doctors, insurers and trial lawyers, was unanimously approved by the Senate on Wednesday and now goes back to the House of Representatives for approval.

### **"School Mapping" for emergency responders gets additional funding in Senate-passed capital budget (Senate Bill 6384)**

When an incident happens at a school, it is critical that police and other emergency personnel have a "map" of the buildings and grounds showing exits and entrances, how a location is situated and how it may be isolated or accessed. In 2003, the operating budget provided state dollars to augment a federal grant to map every high school in the state. The Senate-passed 2006 supplemental capital budget provides an additional \$1 million to ensure new school designs and remodels incorporate mapping and remapping, and to develop an efficient, cost-effective way to maintain up-to-date maps. All high schools in Washington have been mapped, but junior high, middle and elementary schools in the 12th Legislative District have not.

### **Current status of gambling in Washington to get a much needed review**

When gambling was first legalized in Washington in the early 1970s, only parimutuel betting on horse racing was allowed. At that time, approximately \$78 million was wagered annually. Today, Washington allows a wide array of gambling choices with net receipts of nearly \$1.7 billion annually. Many legislators and citizens are concerned about the social and economic implications of gambling and the growth of policies that have lead to expansion. **Senate Concurrent Resolution 8417** creates a joint select committee to review the state's history of gambling and make recommendations regarding the future of Washington's gambling policy-setting. Members of the committee will include legislators; local government and industry representatives; a county prosecuting attorney; representatives from the

state's Horse Racing Commission, Gambling Commission and State Lottery Commission; and a representative from the Department of Social and Health Services problem gambling treatment program. SCR 8417 passed the Senate unanimously and is now in the House of Representatives for consideration. I've written a guest editorial piece on this issue that I hope will run sometime during Problem Gambling Awareness Week on March 6-12.

### **Senate approves bill to allow all teens to fish during group outings**

Under current law, youths 15 and older must purchase individual fishing licenses. The state Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) conducts many special youth fishing events and operates "Go Play Outside" in partnership with the Association of Washington School Principals and the Washington Wildlife Commission. Testimony was heard in committee that during organized fishing trips to learn and understand about natural resources and stewardship, some teenagers older than 14 are unable to actually fish because they can't afford to buy a fishing license. **Senate Bill 6161** authorizes DFW to issue group fishing permits to cover all youths participating in a department-sponsored outdoor education event. SB 6161 was unanimously approved by the Senate and is expected to pass the House of Representatives.

### **Senate approves bill to increase home-heating billing discounts for low-income citizens**

The skyrocketing costs of natural gas and electricity have made it especially hard for low-income senior citizens and families to heat their homes. Early in the session, Senate Bill 2370 was signed into law adding \$7.6 million to the state's Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). This week, the Senate approved a measure appropriating \$6 million to increase tax credits for utilities which offer billing discounts and contribute to LIHEAP. **Senate Bill 6379** is now in the House of Representatives for consideration.

### **Senate approves bill to allow the trapping of moles and gophers that rip up private property, ball fields and parks**

Under current law, people who trap moles and gophers face a \$5,000 fine and up to a year in jail.

**Senate Bill 5319** makes it legal for people to trap nuisance animals like moles and gophers. Other uses of body-gripping traps are by permit only and may be issued by the Department of Fish and Wildlife to prevent damage or injury to property or resources or to protect human health and safety. Recreational trapping remains illegal. Pelts, other than from nuisance animals, may not be sold unless an animal was trapped under a permit. The Fish and Wildlife Commission is directed to adopt rules regarding types of traps, time intervals for checking traps and the use of bait. The rules may not allow the use of traps with teeth or serrated edges or any spring pole device. SB 5319 is now in the House of Representatives for consideration.

As always, I appreciate your calls, letters and e-mails about issues covered in my e-mail updates, plus other issues before the Legislature. It is a huge privilege to serve you in Olympia. I am honored. I am so looking forward to sine die on March 9th. Until next week...

Sincerely,

*Linda*

**LINDA EVANS PARLETTE**

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